

Ajankohtaiset

Cultures of Migration

A Multi-Sited Ethnography of Rural-Urban Migration in Finland

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Lauri Turpeinen



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The starting point of this dissertation was an irritation about some apparent discrepancies in representations of everyday life in the remote countryside of Kainuu. I have been a regular visitor to Kainuu since the late 1980s due to close family ties to the region. Naturally, the fact that I saw Kainuu with the eyes of a vacationer from Germany then and only for a few weeks each summer influenced how I perceived the region, of which I particularly noticed its more idyllic aspects – the quiet lakes, the vast forests and swamps, and sometimes reindeer by the side of the road.

However, these annual summer visits also allowed me to observe some gradual changes the region went through in the last decades. I noticed, for instance, how over time one relative after another gave up on farming. It also seemed as if upon each return to Kainuu another young family member had disappeared in pursuit of work or further education. In some of our relatives' remote

hamlets most remaining inhabitants were pensioners, who would casually comment that their villages most likely will be fully abandoned in ten or twenty years.

It was interesting that to them the out-migration of young people appeared to be almost too commonplace to really be noteworthy. It was expected that young people would leave and that many would never return. These observations tied in with gloomy reports in the Finnish media landscape, which tended to portray Kainuu's remote municipalities as slowly dying peripheries suffering from structural disadvantages, economic decline, over-aging, a lack of opportunities for employment and education as well as from depopulation.

However, despite indeed noticing some traces of these developments, albeit not in such a dramatic fashion as some reports suggested, my relatives in Kainuu appeared very content



with living in Kainuu's countryside and when asked were quick to emphasize that they could not envision ever leaving the region. I also knew of some young people who had made the active decision to stay and to build a life in Kainuu's remote countryside despite the prevalent out-migration among their peers. They, too, appeared to be content with their decisions and their lived example contradicted maligning representations implying that only those young people were staying in regions such as Kainuu's more remote municipalities, who lacked the ability to leave.

It was this cultural context in which young people from Kainuu make their migration decisions along with its discrepancies that I aimed to explore ethnographically in this dissertation. Hereby, I planned to approach the issue at hand not with concepts and theories stemming from research on internal migration, but instead wanted to apply concepts and theories from research on international migration, which tend not to be applied in contexts such as out-migration from rural municipalities.

Core concept – Cultures of Migration

The concept of cultures of migration sits at the heart of the dissertation presented today and it has also found its way into the title of this work. I first encountered the concept in the early stages of the work on this dissertation while conducting a review of ethnological and cultural theories of migration. I immediately felt that the concept potentially could offer a useful perspective on the thematic complex of prevalent out-migration of young people from rural Kainuu.

The concept of cultures of migration emerged during the 1990s in the interdisciplinary field of international migration studies, as an offshoot of the literature on the concept of a cumulative causation of migration. The idea of a cumulative causation of migration suggests, in short, that each act of migration alters the context of the sending community in ways that make further migration from this community more likely. These changes are, amongst others, the establishment of networks between sending and receiving localities, changes in economic or agricultural organization, changes in the distribution of income and, connected to these other transformations, the emergence of a culture of migration.

In the context of this literature this meant that migration would not only alter economic and social aspects but also change local culture in a way that would encourage further migration. It was, for instance, theorized that an influx of previously inaccessible and unaffordable consumer goods and changes in taste along with an increased awareness of the possibilities of social mobility would be catalysts for a transformation of local culture. Migration would in this context of research on seasonal labor migration even become a rite of passage for young people, a necessary step on their path to adulthood, and not taking advantage of the benefits of migration might have negative consequences for their reputation and needed a convincing justification.

The concept of cultures of migration got elevated to the status of a concept in its own right, independent of the overarching concept of cumulative causation, in 2002, when migration researchers Douglas Massey and William Kandel published an article in which they did set out to prove the existence of cultures of migration in Mexico with quantitative means (See Kandel and Massey 2002). The central argument with regards to how cultures of migration



emerge and sustain themselves is here that non-migrants notice the successes of migrants to whom they have social ties and that these observations encourage them to follow their example. This occurs in a context in which a glorification of migrants and migration as well as of behaviors merely associated with migration is prevalent. Migrants would, for instance, be portrayed highly favorably in songs and other artistic representations, and village celebrations would be moved according to the rhythms of seasonal labor migration. Kandel and Massey concluded that for these reasons most locals over time came to understand migration not merely as *a* but rather *the most* sensible strategy to achieve success. Local everyday life increasingly revolves around migration. It becomes an omnipresent, undeniable, and a celebrated aspect of people's everyday lives and local culture. In short, a culture of migration.

The case studies undergirding the literature in which the concept of cultures of migration was first developed focused on seasonal labor migration between Mexico and the United States. This resulted in some underlying assumptions influencing the genesis of the concept, like, for instance, presupposing a strong income disparity between sending and receiving localities. Nevertheless, the concept was used on occasion in the last two decades in case studies focusing on, amongst others, international labor migration, migration within certain professions like nurses or physicians, or out-migration from island communities or other remote or peripheral regions in different parts of the world.

In this literature, the concept was also subject to fierce criticism. These criticisms concerned for instance the implied unrealistic idea of an ever-increasing out-migration that would eventually fully depopulate regions and does not include the possibility of migration streams changing direction. Others criticized the culturally deterministic proposition that migration would somehow be culturally induced, a hard-wired reaction making people move. Another point of criticism was that the concept disregarded the great variations in terms of lifestyle choices and ambitions in all communities, while others pointed out the lack of a clear definition of the concept.

I chose to adopt the concept cultures of migration but quickly encountered these and other issues with its argumentation. However, I felt that it still offered an interesting perspective on the topic of out-migration from Kainuu regardless of its weaknesses. Hence, instead of discarding the concept as an analytical tool I adjusted the aims of the dissertation to offer some suggestions on how to develop the concept. An in-depth literature review on previous usages of the concept as well as the empirical material gathered for this dissertation led me to develop five assumptions, or theses, about cultures of migration, which ultimately also structured this dissertation – each of the five empirical chapter focuses on one of these five aspects of cultures of migration.

The development of cultures of migration requires a long-standing migration history

The first assumption suggests that a long-standing local migration history is a necessity for cultures of migration to develop. Cultures of migration are different from circumstances in which a sudden event causes strong emigration. It is not the fact that many are leaving that distinguishes cultures of migration from other cases of strong out-migration, but instead a situation in which consistent migration has permeated local culture and left its traces in it over time characterizes cultures of migration. This aspect has some similarities to a dynamic



that other researchers have – independent of the literature on cultures of migration – called a migration tradition.

A desire for social distinction sustains cultures of migration

The second assumption states that an expectation to leave tends to only concern a segment of young people in the affected communities, but not everyone. A young person falling into this category faces a need to justify their decision to stay, while staying would not warrant an explanation from other young people. Hereby, in cultures of migration, young people falling into the second category of those not expected to leave tend to be vilified as maligned *others*, whose decision to stay often tends to be portrayed as resulting from an incapability to leave and not as the outcome of a conscious decision. Those expected to leave, in turn, leave also because not migrating holds the danger of a social demotion for them by becoming associated with those *others* not expected to leave. The social dynamics and tensions between these groups sustain existing cultures of migration.

Cultures of migration affect how migrants think about their migration destinations and their future migration plans

The third assumption proposes that cultures of migration are de-territorialized in that they continue to influence the mobility decisions of out-migrants also long after they have left. This third thesis on cultures of migration also attempts to shed light on a blind spot in the literature as much of it focuses first and foremost on how cultures of migration become evident locally at the sending destinations. Consequently, by leaving their home regions the out-migrants along with their experiences also often disappear from research on cultures of migration. It is suggested here that growing up in a culture of migration will have an impact on how out-migrants think about the possibility of return migration also years after leaving, and that the influence of cultures of migration reaches beyond the immediately affected localities.

Those refusing to migrate despite cultures of migration have personal ambitions that are incompatible with leaving

The fourth assumption concerning cultures of migration is that those not leaving despite a culture of migration belong to what Syed Ali has called a “subculture of non-migration” (Ali 2007, 43), the members of which have personal ambitions and lifestyle preferences that are incompatible with migrating. They are not staying because of an incapability to leave, as some representations of young people not leaving localities with cultures of migration suggest, but instead have made an active choice to stay to be able to realize their personal ambitions and to remain involved in their local communities.

Cultures of migration influence how both migrants and non-migrants think about the future of their home regions

The fifth assumption about cultures of migration is that they do influence how both non-migrants and out-migrants think about the future of their home region. In cultures of migration out-migration is an omnipresent feature of local community life and those choosing



to stay also acknowledge its impact on their communities. It is characteristic of cultures of migration that both out-migrants and non-migrants expect out-migration to continue also in the future. This belief invites pessimistic evaluations of possible future developments and causes out-migrants to consider return migration unlikely, while the non-migrants expect their everyday lives to become more difficult in the future due to this development – while remaining steadfast in their conviction that migrating is incompatible with their personal life goals.

Methodology and positionality

This research project was conceptualized as a multi-sited ethnography. The plan was to conduct twelve months of fieldwork in two villages in rural Kainuu in addition to working with interlocutors here in Helsinki, who had left Kainuu to build a new life in the city. The empirical foundation was initially supposed to be created by relying on a method-mix including participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and a visual participatory elicitation method that invited the interlocutors to take photographs in their everyday life that were relevant to the research interest.

The realities of fieldwork quickly made me realize that this approach would not be feasible. It turned out that participant observation, a distinguishing feature of ethnographies, would be difficult to apply at both fieldwork locations and not particularly productive in terms of the goals of the research project. In Kainuu, for instance, starting out my first six months of fieldwork in the depth of winter, I quickly understood that observing and participating in the public village life would not be a practical strategy as there seemed to be no such public village life happening outside of the private sphere of people's homes. Joining a local sports group proved to be a useful countermeasure and got me in contact with young people, but overall, despite being able to interview enough interlocutors, many fieldwork days were uneventful and lacked opportunities for beneficial participant observation. At the time I experienced this as me failing to conduct a proper ethnography. I came only to understand later that these quiet days, for instance, first enabled me to relate to the excitement that some of the interlocutors felt about annual events like the moose hunting season. Consequently, these quiet days were indeed a vital part of the ethnographic process. In Helsinki, I also chose to rely on interviews and the visual elicitation method and not to include participant observation for similar reasons. Namely, a scarcity of opportunities in which it would have been possible to use participant observation in a constructive manner with regards to the research interest.

In 2015, at the outset of this project, I had been a newcomer to Helsinki myself and Kainuu's countryside was much more familiar to me than the streets of Helsinki, which in a way mirrored the situation of the interlocutors in Helsinki. Despite my family ties and this similar experience in terms of mobility I do not consider this dissertation an autoethnography. The fact that I was born and raised in Germany and my initially weaker Finnish skills clearly marked me as an outsider and provided some distance. However, I have never experienced this as a hindrance. In fact, it turned out to be an asset not to be just a Finnish researcher from Helsinki, which might have carried some unwanted associations with it, but to be from further afield. My own roots in Kainuu, in turn, did create a sense of belonging and certainly opened doors to me while my obvious German background gave me the freedom to ask questions about matters that would be self-explanatory or obvious to anyone from Finland.



There was no assumption of shared knowledge that does not have to be made explicit. Accordingly, in terms of positionality this simultaneous distance from and closeness to the interlocutors provided the best possible conditions for conducting ethnographic work.

Findings: Cultures of migration in rural Kainuu and how to modify the concept

I conclude in this dissertation that young people's out-migration from some of the remote municipalities in Kainuu is indeed influenced by cultures of migration – understood here broadly as dynamic socio-cultural contexts encouraging the out-migration of young people. Hereby, especially circumstances in which migrating locally takes on the role, or meaning, of a rite of passage, of a necessary step to be taken by young people on their path to adulthood, can serve to distinguish cultures of migration from other cases of strong out-migration.

The concept – if its flaws are kept in mind while applying it – can provide an interesting perspective on cases of persistent and long-lasting out-migration by highlighting particularly the socio-cultural mechanics sustaining this form of migration. This way the concept can contribute to achieving a better understanding of the cultural contexts in which young people from rural and remote regions make their migration decisions, which can be a useful perspective for migration researchers and decision-makers facing similar forms of migration elsewhere.

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Lauri Turpeinen currently works as a planning officer for the Research Services of the University of Helsinki and sees his professional future in the field of higher education administration.